



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

One Team's Approach to Village Stability Operations

By [Rory Hanlin](#)

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"If you have seen one VSO, you have seen one VSO."

This paper is an effort to demonstrate my team's approach to VSO using the principles and TTPs that numerous articles have recently highlighted in the July-September issue of Special Warfare Magazine. It illustrates the practical application of the principles of VSO in the current operational environment and details exactly how these principles appear through the prism of the Military Decision-Making Process. This is the product of the team's assessment, planning, execution, after action review and refinement process over the last 150 days of VSO operations in an austere and isolated location.

The Village Stability Operations Methodology is a bottom up approach that employs USSOF teams and partnered units embedded with villagers in order to establish security and to support and promote socio-economic development and good governance. Each Village Stability Team is a distinct entity with its own culture, appearances and way of operating, which reflects the Afghan dynamic of that particular site. It is true that Village Stability Platforms (VSP) throughout Afghanistan vary greatly within the context of conducting Village Stability Operations (VSO), yet every VSP applies the same principles of the methodology and shepherds the village through the phases of *Shape, Hold, Build, and Expand / Transition*; culminating with connecting the village to GIRoA through the district and province.

Our VSP is one such site that has made significant progress in the year since USSOF teams began the VSO effort. This VSP is no exception to the rule; it has its own unique blend of VSO applied by the Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha (SFODA) and based on the cultural realities of the district. But like all VSO, operations are broadly categorized into Governance, Development and Security. It is useful, then to illuminate the particularities of specific VSPs to determine how the principles of VSO are at play across a broad spectrum of different and distinct sites. This analysis is an effort to do just that: to identify how the principles of VSO filter through the Military Decision Making Process to render a coherent campaign plan with a clear way forward. This analysis will cover the ODA's plan for the Governance, Security and Development lines of operations with a definition of success in each.

The district in which we are operating presents distinct challenges that arise primarily from its deeply divided human and physical terrain and the lack of coalition and GIRoA presence over the last decade. Since our arrival we have continually developed the ground situation and our understanding of the district's idiosyncrasies. Based on this continual assessment, progress along the VSO shape-hold-build-transition/expansion model is inhibited by 3 key factors: a defunct system of governance, a divided population, and an under-developed economy based in subsistence farming. These factors collude to form a survivalist culture with a zero-sum worldview.

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Currently, both traditional and GIROA governance systems are defunct. The village elders that make up the traditional governance structures have had all visages of power stripped from them by years of constant fighting, instability and successive regime changes. They do not have access to the resources necessary to establish themselves as local power brokers. The vast majority of the elders represent villages dominated by subsistence farming. These villages do not produce any respectable degree of disposable income, thus the village and elders are denied the most functional source of power.

Tribal disputes between the Barakzai and Alizai tribes also play a key role in dividing the population. The Barakzai account for approximately 50% of the population and have been the traditional power holders. The disenfranchised Alizai tribe is between 25% and 35% of the population. Smaller tribes of less than 5% of the population comprise the remaining population. The Ishaqzi tribe is the most significant actor in this group. Largely discontented with the current government, the Ishaqzi are centered around Sakzi Kalay and are a traditional supporter of the Taliban in the district.

The harsh terrain, exacerbated by austere weather conditions, with no major Main Supply Route and limited movement through mountain passes truncates the lines of communication and interchange between the villages in the district and between the district and Kandahar proper. One of the most inhibiting factors all aspects of progress in the district, the harsh terrain limits the district government's ability to collect information and project force via the ANP. It raises the cost of moving goods to markets and erodes the opportunities for economic expansion.

The majority of the district survives on subsistence farming. These farms do not yield any surplus income that can be invested in local economic growth. Currently, there are no natural resources in the district capable of driving economic growth other than the arable land. Any local economic growth will be based on increasing the ability of local farmers to produce surplus of agricultural products and preserve those products to take advantage of optimal market conditions.

Because the populace cannot conceive of cooperation in pursuit of a mutually beneficial outcome, it will ensure the survival of the individual, the family, the village and the tribe. The populace fights each other for any and all CF assistance, believing in a zero-sum game which cannot be mutually beneficial to all. To change this unproductive mentality, we are pursuing three key lines of operation in the district that addresses the major issues and problems. First, the ODA is focusing on enhancing the efficacy of the district government, its inner-cooperation and its relationship with the populace. Second, the team is actively fostering economic growth through various agricultural and civil affairs programs focused on the District Center and bazaar. Third, the ODA is expanding the ANSFs' ability to secure the district, expanding the overall ANSF security apparatus and establishing them as the district's sole dispute arbiter.

Governance

Inefficiency, corruption and tribal bias characterized governance in the district. The length of tenure, differing tribal affiliation, lifelong connections to the populace and relative prevalence of financial corruption have severely hampered the district leadership's ability to effectively govern without bias. Our goal is to enhance the district government by focusing on three tasks: empowering the District Governor, establishing ANSFs' monopoly on the legitimate use of force and improving the efficacy of the district government.

Empowering the District Governor

The tribes of the district recognize the district governor as a fair and impartial judge, and our first effort is to build his power base. The District Governor (DG) has no functioning power over the ANP and lacks

the ability to enforce his decisions through force of arms. The DG also lacks resources he can disburse to or withhold from the population. Because of these two factors, the district populace sees the DG as largely unable to address key grievances. To improve the DG's popular perception, we are executing these four sub-tasks:

1. **Establish the executive shura.** This provides the governor with a forum to engage the collective population. We are advising the district governor on the best way to use these shuras to expand and solidify his power base. The district has elected a four man shura to advise the District Governor on where to build small critical infrastructure projects (wells, irrigation ditches, etc). This District Development Assembly provides the necessary connection from the District Governor to the people receiving aid.
2. **Demonstrate the district governor's access to resources.** This requires enabling the governor to provide basic services, specifically popular access to medical care, access to a district school, and year-round low cost transportation to the provincial services and markets in Kandahar.
3. **Empower the district governor to grant or refuse village development projects.** We are encouraging the DG to focus on the construction of check dams, storage silos and farm-to-market roads that link towns to the district center.
4. **Enable the DG to build a broad district government.** By authorizing the DG to hire key leaders in the district and pay them a stable salary or to fire individuals whose villages defect from GIROA, we encourage these leaders to assume a personal vested interest in supporting the government.

Improving the Efficacy of Government

For years, the District Government has consisted of two positions: the District Governor and the District Chief of Police (DCOP). However, this leadership duo has a relationship rife with disagreements, miscommunication, and power struggles. The DG of the Alizai tribe and the DCOP of the Barakzai tribe have held their positions for six and eight years respectively. This dysfunctional relationship leads to an ineffective governing body split largely along tribal lines. Additionally, no governmental staff exists to support these two positions. The DCOP has acted as the district's judge, logistics officer, tribal affairs officer, general contractor, and cook. Both leaders are forced to govern outside of their traditional roles in order to accomplish marginal successes. To encourage better cooperation between the districts two main political leaders, we are executing these two sub-tasks:

1. **Persuade the DG/DCOP to act in their governmental roles.** As long as the focus and time of the district leaders remains so inefficiently divided, they will never be able to address the district's most important issues. We are addressing the district leadership's overextension by advising them to narrow their role, delegate to trusted individuals and focus on improving the entire district.
2. **Improve communication between the two district leaders.** To increase both the frequency and quality of the communication among the district leadership, the ODA conducts nightly meetings with the DG, DCOP and NDS Chief. The ODA focuses on constructing positive sum scenarios to create a balance of power between the District Governor and the Chief of Police that encourages mutual cooperation. These nightly meetings also allow the ODA to advise/assist in all major governmental decision-making, ensuring tribal rivalries and past biases are removed from government policy.

Monopolizing the ANP's legitimate use of force

In recent years, the DCOP and his ANP have aggravated the relationship between the government security apparatus and the local populace. A history of negative actions toward the Alizai and Ishaqzi tribes has bred their deep-seeded mistrust and anger towards the ANP. Additionally, insurgents in the district constantly intimidate and harass the local populace, thereby capitalizing on the pervading survivalist

mentality and coercing the populace to acquiesce to their demands. To refute the popular view that ANSF no longer hold legitimate authority to police the district, we are executing these three sub-tasks:

1. **Improve the public image of ANP.** The ODA plans on improving the ANP's image by supervising, advising, assisting and participating in their operations at all times, ensuring they act as neutral mediators in all situations.
2. **Delegitimize the insurgents' use of violence.** The ODA is using its attached MISO assets to attack the insurgents' use of force, haphazard IED emplacement and intimidation of villagers. Broadcast radio messages are aimed at delegitimizing insurgent operations in the district.
3. **Train ANP on proper policing procedures.** The ODA is addressing ANP's lack of professionalism by allowing the Embedded Police Mentors (EPM), subject matter experts in policing, to train and advise the ANP in the conduct of policing in the district. These EPMs will also advise the DCOP on proper procedures for the use of force, imprisonment and conflict resolution.

Development

The underdeveloped economic system in the district is one of the most critical factors enabling insurgent activity and freedom of movement in the district. The lack of surplus production and access to markets discourages the residents from economically engaging the rest of Afghanistan. In turn, there is no taxable financial surplus to spark the provincial government's interest in the district. The lack of security and paved roads combined with a porous border makes commerce in Pakistan more cost efficient than commerce in Afghanistan. These factors combine to make the district disenfranchised and economically isolated from the rest of Afghanistan. Our goal is to improve the economy by stabilizing the supply-demand relationship in the district by executing four tasks: developing the bazaar into an economic center, creating a local surplus of agricultural production, lowering the cost of moving goods to markets and providing basic essential services that support long-term economic and social development.

Developing the bazaar into an economic center

The ODA is focused on creating a bazaar that supports year-round economic activity and functions as the cultural and social hub of the district. In our first step, we renovated the bazaar using the "cash-for-work" concept. To date, local workers cleaned the bazaar, installed trash cans, and dug a network of drainage ditches to keep the roads in the bazaar passable during the rainy seasons, and are planning on install lighting throughout the bazaar to increase the length of the business day. The ANP conduct regular patrols in the bazaar to maintain a security presence. Recently, contractors have arrived to build the District Clinic, a new District Center (DC), and refurbish the district's police station. Additionally the contractors will build the district's first road through the bazaar and DC connecting the surrounding villages and farmlands to its main marketplace and seat of governance.

1. **Support a year-round farm-to-buyer connection.** This connection requires supporting continuous communication between local farm owners and buyers that have access to capital reserves and broader markets in Afghanistan's urban centers. We can identify farmers that will grow a surplus of agricultural produce and connect them to buyers in large urban centers. These buyers begin inspecting the farmers' crops during the growing season and agree on a price prior to harvest time. This guarantees the farmers a set profit and ensures they have a vested interest in maximizing the productive output of their farms.
2. **Start critical businesses through micro-grants.** Attendance in the bazaar will increase proportional to the increase in desirable goods available in the bazaar shops at competitive prices. We can speed up this process by giving micro-grants to individuals —to bring new goods into the market. Goods like the brick-fuel press and services like fee-based VOIP communications are a more efficient

alternative to those currently available and spur growth of inter-dependence in the district.

Creating local surplus of agricultural produce

While enjoying the soil and climate conditions to support year-round planting and harvesting cycles, district farmers work their farms only a few months out of the year due to limited crop diversity and scarce water supply. This problem culminates at harvest time because the majority of the district harvests their crops at the same time. Without the ability to preserve their harvest for the most favorable market conditions, farmers must deliver their surplus crops to market simultaneously. This surplus exceeds demand for these goods and depresses the price to a point where the profit margin disappears. In addition, the crop supply cannot meet the district demand throughout the remainder of the year, destroying the economic incentive for any excess agricultural production. By setting the agricultural conditions that allow the local farmers to produce crops beyond basic subsistence, we give them potential access to a profit margin. In addition, farming becomes a profitable alternative to illicit employment. In order to create this agricultural surplus, we are executing three sub-tasks:

1. **Improve crop quality and diversity.** To institute a winter growing season with the help of agricultural contractors we are continually distributing higher quality and more durable seeds to the local farmers. In the long term, this harvest will produce enough wheat for each farmer to both feed his family and have enough harvest to plant during the next November and December.
2. **Improve access to critical and scarce agricultural resources.** To increasing farmers' access to water, seed, fertilizer, and farming knowledge, we are encouraging and supporting the construction of check dams and other water conservation techniques. The winter wheat and other seed dissemination programs are addressing the narrow and limited access to seeds. In addition, we are distributing urea-based fertilizer, as well as offering a urea nitrate for ammonium nitrate exchange program. To enhance farming knowledge, we (in partnership with USDA) have constructed two model farms to teach improved farming practices to the population.
3. **Improve methods to preserve goods for future sales.** By teaching produce preservation techniques and building storage silos we can stabilize the market for these crops through the year. This improves the profit margin for the farmers and encourages them to implement their farming practices throughout the round.

Lowering the costs of commerce

The district has no transportation infrastructure. Roads in the district are rough worn out edges of even rougher terrain that facilitate marginally faster movement by motorcycle or pack animal. Trucks can traverse only a handful of roads. These travel conditions prohibit an efficient transit of goods to market, which greatly incentivizes subsistence farming. To facilitate the efficient trade of goods, we are executing two sub-tasks:

1. **Build farm to market roads in the district.** These roads are graveled, improved roads that connect the DC Bazaar to villages and subsequently from villages to the farm. These roads will help encourage farmers to bring their agricultural surplus to market for sale by lowering the cost of moving goods, as well as easing and shortening the journey. The first road has recently been completed, connecting surrounding farmlands to their villages.
2. **Facilitate and supervise construction of the DC Loop.** This road will run through the bazaar and the district DC. Currently contractors have begun the road and will complete it late this year.

Provide basic essential infrastructure and services

The District Government has no capacity to address the basic needs of its people. The district has little

medical infrastructure, with all of the populace receiving medical aid from local doctors with minimal education and skill. The extremely underdeveloped school system lacks a formal education system with a graduated grade structure. Informal education exists in mosques and madrassas scattered around the district, and consists entirely of religious learning. Lack of support from the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education exacerbates these problems and renders the District Government unable to provide for its people. To facilitate the district's delivery of the essential services, we will execute three sub-tasks:

1. **Fund schooling and distribute school supplies.** We are working with the DG to determine the locations of schools that will be instrumental in educating the children of the district. Two major schools have opened with a total of 350 students. We have enabled the district to open its own school near the bazaar with 20 students. We have also empowered the DG to be the focal point for all school supply distribution, delivering school supplies monthly to a total of over 1700 children. The program facilitates the transfer of responsibilities to the Ministry of Education representative for the district.
2. **Facilitate the construction of the district clinic.** Previously, medical infrastructure was limited to small, private practice doctors operating out of a random assortment of villages detached from the district government. The ODA has addressed this issue by funding a clinic focused on preventative medicine, public health and movement to higher care. It has recently opened in the bazaar. This temporary clinic provides basic medical care to the local populace and provides the district with its first centralized treatment facility in recent history. It houses the district medical staff until a more permanent district clinic is constructed. The clinic has a dedicated doctor with up to ten community health workers. Contractors also have recently started construction on the district clinic, located just northeast of the bazaar. This is a more permanent solution to the issue of lack of medical treatment in the district. This district clinic will eventually offer multiple doctors, nurses and community health workers in a full service setting.
3. **Refurbish the District Police Station, build a new District Center and Refurbish the District Mosque.** These three other major infrastructure projects will address the needs of both the local populace and the district government. The current district center is severely lacking in basic hygiene, available living and work space, jail facilities, latrines and showers, electricity, kitchen and mess facilities. The current district center will be refurbished and upgraded to become the District ANP police station. The district annex will provide the DG with his advisors and secretaries workspace and lodging. The district mosque remains unfinished in the bazaar next to the district center. The UAE provides funding for mosque construction, while we oversee the contractors. Once built, the mosque will provide a central location for the local populace to gather, pray and interact with one another. We hope it will become an important cultural symbol of the government's commitment to its people, cooperation between Afghans and their government and the overall progress of the district.

Security

The nature of the district presents numerous unique challenges that severely impede the security infrastructure from protecting the populace. The harsh, mountainous terrain dominates the district, restricting travelers to motorcycle and pack animal movement. The mountains scattered across the district present numerous opportunities for the Taliban to use as bed down locations, training camps and areas from which to stage attacks and emplace IEDs.

The district austerity and its rural populace inhibit the support it receives from higher levels of the Afghan Government. Until recently, the provincial government had completely ignored the district, preferring to treat it with benign neglect. This lack of support from the provincial government has lead to an unsupervised, ill-fitted, under-manned, poorly led and largely untrained Afghan National Police (ANP) force that polices the district with imbibed tribal biases and little self-restraint. In fact, tribal differences in the district play a key role in determining the distribution of power, money and resources. These factors

collude to create a serious security gap, which the Taliban exploit with their own customs and law to effectively intimidate, harass and coerce the populace into general acquiescence, despite the fact that many of the village elders are ex-mujahedeen fighters. Our goal is to build security by expelling the Taliban out of traditional operating areas in the district by executing three tasks: disrupting insurgent operations, supporting the district ANSF infrastructure and securing the district's key terrain.

Disrupting insurgent operations

Some patrols focus on engaging the populace, conducting Key Leader Engagements, Afghan Local Police recruitment, Civil Affairs project evaluation, IED location/reduction, intelligence gathering and establishing a security presence in the district. Other patrols focus on IED emplacement disruption/deterrence, reconnaissance/surveillance and overwatch. To successfully disrupt the insurgents operations in the district and build white space, we will execute two additional sub-tasks:

1. **Remove insurgents and disrupt major resupply routes:** By taking the Taliban personalities off of the battlefield we deny them the necessary leadership to conduct operations.
2. **Identify/disrupt insurgent district operations.** By establishing a robust intelligence network, coordinating and enhancing intelligence collection through the National Directorate of Security (NDS) and ANP, conducting sensitive site exploitation on all IEDs, and increasing Intelligence, Surveillance Reconnaissance collection, we are acquiring a comprehensive picture of Taliban operational Tactics Techniques and Procedures in the district.

Supporting the district ANSF security infrastructure

The provincial government's denial of support to the district's ANP, NDS and Afghan Border Police (ABP) has crippled the ability of the security apparatus to effectively project force, recruit, equip and train new members, promote from within and address logistical deficiencies. The Afghan Local Police (ALP) program in the district has the potential to develop into the most important pillar in the ANSF structure and represents a promising way forward for establishing enduring security in the district. Though this program shows potential, the populace has been slow to cooperate. Village elders in the district have been supportive of the idea but are reluctant to demonstrate a substantive commitment, citing Taliban intimidation, coercion and fear of reprisals. With time, the ALP program may prove to be the decisive chapter in closing the book on the Taliban's hold of the populace and in bringing lasting security to the district as a whole.

1. **Increase the number of ANP.** We have recently received two embedded police mentors to assist in training, advising, mentoring and equipping the district ANP. They have a direct connection to mentors with the MOI and have already established more visibility on the true number of ANP in the district, their supply of weapons and ammunition, their logistical infrastructure and the level of corruption. This link will also facilitate a necessary increase in the number of ANP in the district. Since the district ANP have no NCOs, only the DCOP has arrest authority. We plan to promote high achieving ANP soldiers to NCO rank and to populate the patrolman ranks with new recruits.
2. **Expand the NDS role in the district.** Historically, the district NDS have added little value to the security and intelligence network of the district. They lacked leadership, purpose, and motivation. After lobbying the NDS provincial leadership, they sent a strong leader to reorganize, reshape and assert control of the NDS mission in the district. Since his arrival, we have established an extremely productive relationship of information swapping. We will continue to pursue a greater relationship with the NDS to improve intelligence gathering.
3. **Solidify the logistical support chain.** While the ANP and NDS organizations have logistics officers in the provincial headquarters, they suffer from the district's austerity and almost completely rely on us for all classes of supply. Recently, we asked the Kandahar PCOP to create a mobile maintenance

team (MMT) comprised of a complete package of maintenance and resupply personnel from MOI to travel to the district on a monthly basis to resolve all logistics issues.

4. **Support the ABP Checkpoints.** ABP's checkpoints (CP) along the AFPAK border range from a heavily fortified structure with an array of fully manned guard towers to a small almost abandoned outpost with little to no support. We communicate with the ABP CPs through the DCOP, and we plan on continued support of the checkpoints in the future.
5. **Build ALP.** We have trained and equipped ALP mostly centered on the DC. We plan to expand the role of ALP in the security infrastructure as we continue to train more of them further away from the DC.

Securing key terrain

IED emplacement in the river valleys of the district are a threat to local nationals, Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and Coalition Forces in the district. Both ANP CPs and patrolling will solidify the recent security gains and change the popular negative perception of security among the populace. A robust and permanent ANSF presence will prevent insurgent manipulation of the populace through their use of IED emplacement, night letters, intimidation, harassment and coercion. The support of the village elders in the key villages along the major wadis of the district will determine its future. Additionally, large civil affairs projects that provide the district populace with demonstrable progress are extremely important to secure from insurgent attacks. In addition to the civil infrastructure destruction, a successful attack would be an important victory at a time when the insurgency is perceived as weak.:

1. **Build ANSF CPs along the district's major river valleys.** We plan to establish fortified checkpoints manned by ANP and ALP near key villages in support of village security, ALP recruitment, infrastructure protection, IED emplacement interdiction, and demonstration of the government's commitment to security.
2. **Protect major CA projects in the district.** The ANP and NDS stationed at the district center are responsible for securing the planned civil infrastructure projects in the bazaar and district center. Additionally, the ODA will construct two fortified ANSF CPs near the bazaar to prevent a possible insurgent attack.

Success in the District

In Village Stability Operations establishing a common operating picture and defining success in pursuit of executing the commander's intent is a critical factor that affects the entire team effort. VSO in the district is characterized by managing and completing a vast array of seemingly unrelated tasks that interact in complex unimaginable ways, all in a system of decentralized execution. As the ODA continues along its three lines of operation we are constantly developing metrics to measure progress toward a common understanding of "success." This common understanding is vital in achieving unity of effort within the context of VSO. Without this common understanding and subsequent unity of effort, the ODA would be left with a disorganized array of concurrent operations that would likely result in either a duplication of effort or even worse, team members working against each other.

Security

- District ANP/ALP have the monopoly on the legitimate use of force and use it responsibly
- ALP checkpoint system links villages to the Chief of Police and the ANP; ALP dissuades insurgent intimidation, harassment and coercion
- Insurgents are disrupted and freedom of maneuver along major ratlines is significantly degraded
- ABP CPs able to effectively repel insurgent attacks and secure the border area

Governance

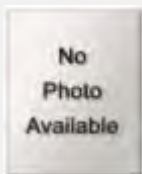
- District Governor promotes and executes development projects through the District Development Assembly shura
- District government seen as a legitimate, neutral arbiter of Afghan law. Government able to effectively resolve disputes
- DG/DCoP relationship is balanced and adequately effective

Development

- Lines of communication are open for the citizens of the district to major urban centers
- Economy based on Afghan products and not solely on Pakistani based products
- Infrastructure is improved to facilitate faster, easier movement from farm to market and village to village
- District Center Bazaar provides a market for the local farmers' crop surplus and accordingly becomes the economic center of the district

This article reflects the personal opinions and observations of the author, not any sanctioned command view. The article was updated on 9/12/2011 with minor word changes and errata that did not substantively effect the original work.

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